

# IN QUEST OF FORM

*Sukriti Ghosal*

The concept and status of form in art have perplexed generations of theorists. While the formalists exalt form over content and the contentists advocate the primacy of content, the majority verdict favours a holistic view that form and content are organically related to each other. If content vitalises form, form gives the 'airy nothing' a local habitation and a name. The form-content antinomy, incidentally, may be traced to two opposite views on the nature of art and its relation to reality. Unlike the contentists who look upon art as a transparent glass that 'leads the eager intellect to direct apprehension of reality', (Novitz 309) the formalists take it as an opaque glass which itself is the focus of our attention. The formalist stand has been well argued by J.A.M. Whistler in his 'Ten O'Clock' lecture where he ridicules the silly habit 'of looking... not at a picture, but through it, at some human fact, that shall, or shall not... better their mental or moral state', (Peters 110). This article intends to weigh the merits of the formalist contention for a better understanding of this formalist proposition.

'Form' (Lat. *forma*, shape/beauty) is a word with many distinct meanings. In Plato FORM is synonymous with *eidos* or the Idea which an artist attempts to body forth in his work. The neoclassical critics used it in the sense of style or proper arrangement of component units in a piece of composition. To the New Critics 'form' signifies 'all those elements of a verbal composition—rhythm, metrics, structure, coherence, emphasis, diction, images' which are 'extraneous to matter' or content, (Wimsatt 748). Taking his cue from Coleridge, Herbert Read draws our attention to two kinds of form—organic and abstract. According to Read, form is 'organic' if it shapes itself from within, evolves like a plant into a whole by internal energy and fuses 'in one vital unity both structure and content' (Read 9). Read distinguishes it from 'abstract' form which he defines as the fossilized pattern of the organic in which the intention of the artist is no longer related to the inherent dynamism of an inventive act, but seeks 'to adopt content to predetermined structure'. Form, in this sense, designates a pre-existent shape, that is, genre or literary type. Whatever be its sense, the contentists claim that form is always determined by content. Form, they hold, is but the working out of the content in the realm of the superstructure. Incidentally,



content here does not imply just the theme but the 'feelings, thoughts and ideas' involved in its conception. This accounts for different content nuclei of the 'same' subject. For example, Tagore's *Bisarjan* and *Rajarshi* both have the 'same' theme—that sacrificial rites are singularly cruel and therefore should be discontinued. But whereas in the former his primary concern is the conflict between love and might, in the latter what monopolises his creative self is the character of Govindamanikya, the saintly king who interdicts the savage practice of sacrifice. The un-alike points of view needs must embody themselves in different forms. And they do, in dramatic and fictional, respectively.

Though the contentist point about the supremacy of 'matter' over form seems plausible enough, it is difficult to minimise the merits of the formalist contention. An idea, claim the formalists, is of no value till it becomes incarnate and is formed into an image. John Osborne has quippingly observed: 'But in art ideas are two a penny ... It is the carrying through of the exercise, the form that an idea takes which makes it take off ...' (Osborne 12). The formalists absolutise form because it is form that conveys feelings to us and render them 'infectious' in Tolstoy's sense of the term. Prof. Sengupta, who is sceptical about formalism, therefore, prudently concedes: 'The truth and vitality of artistic creation are the gift of form and since without this faculty which we call formative imagination no man can be an artist, we may conclude, but in this sense alone, that form is prior to content' (Sengupta 231).

However, most critics maintain that like Siamese twins form and content quicken into life at a single birth—both being organically related to each other. Form is not, therefore, the husk of the kernel, nor is the content 'an impure form' as held by Valery, (Wellek 58). Their oneness is not like the resemblance of shape to shadow, a 'correspondence between the essential idea and the accidental existence'. It is a unity in which the soul is 'made incarnate; the body instinct with spirit,' (SL 201) Matthew Arnold certainly has this notion of form in mind when in 'The Study of Poetry' he observes that 'the superior character of truth and seriousness in the matter and substance of best poetry is inseparable from the superiority of diction and movement making its style and manner', (Arnold 115). Even the Marxist critics to whom content has a prior claim endorse the organicity of form and content: '...when the content of a work can be separated from its form, or form from content, then as a rule this shows that the work lacks both artistic content and artistic form' (Zis 143-144).

It follows, therefore, that in great works of art form and content are inseparable. Why do the formalists then put a premium on form? Actually, the cohesion of form and content is the product of artistry, of craftsmanship. In order to attune form to content a writer wrestles with words and ideas.



This scanning through vocabulary for perfect accommodation of speech to vision is a self-conscious effort. Indeed, picking up the right word from the galaxy of words, what Walter Pater in his essay on style calls 'asceticism' or the tact of omission of surplusage, (Pater : *passim*) is a volitional quest. The process involved may be explained in terms of the craft of the sculptor. A sculptor slowly removes the superfluity in a block of stone to carve out a form which is indistinguishable from his vision of it. Andre Gide probably meant this when he observed to Oscar Wilde: 'A sculptor does not try to translate his thought into marble; he thinks in marble, directly (Feidelson 31)'. Since this form creating exercise cannot be avoided, Wilde, notorious for his exaggerations, makes a fetish of form and claims that 'form can create feeling', (PE 333) the real artist 'proceeds, not from the feeling to form, but from form to thought and passion' (PE 333). But one must not forget that in the same context Wilde endorses the indissolubility of form and content ('in art...the body is the soul') and elsewhere emphatically notes that 'form and substance cannot be separated in a work of art; they are always one' (PE 378). It is a paradox of art that form is one with content but this oneness has to be fleshed out. Sometimes authors deliberately choose a form apparently mix-corresponding to its content. For example, the epic paraphernalia in Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* is not in keeping with its 'slight' subject. But then even this mock-heroic fabric shows a unique synthesis of texture and structure. The hollowness of Belinda's world, one understands, suffers utmost comic reduction due to the epic ceremony adopted in its presentation. To wit, the new poetic form calls for a tactful misalliance between the 'abstract' epical form and the societal triviality divested of epic majesty. It follows, therefore, that form is one with content but this oneness has to be meticulously shaped. It is in recognition of this duality that Eliot non-committally observes: '...it is always true to say that form and content are the same thing, and always true to say that they are different thing' (In Wellek 55).

The advocates of the theory of inspiration deny that organic form is consciously, strenuously executed and look upon creation as an absolutely unconscious affair. To them every writer is an inspired scribe recording foreign ideas in a fit of trance. But expression, we have already seen, cannot be involuntary and the creator's mind consciously selects words in the process of formation. Though form-creation is extremely laborious, it appears 'unpremeditated' because every artist is artfully artless. Indeed art lies in concealing art, and always 'preference precedes perfection' (Rev. Keats). Brander Matthews justly notes that technique is 'most successful when its existence is least suspected and this is one reason why it is often overlooked' (Nostrand 215). However, great artists have so wonderful a facility for choosing words that their works seem to be 'a moment's thought'. Yet they too sedulously dig out the fit word like Mayakovsky from 'thousands of tons / Of verbal ore'. The paradox involved has been brilliantly



explained by the Sanskrit rhetoricians in terms of an analogy: Utpalashatapatravedabat—like piercing a hundred lotus-petals. The needle punches them in a twinkling of an eye—so easily that we mistake them for a single petal, though, strictly speaking, the needle must penetrate each petal individually. Analogously, even great poets consciously exercise their critical faculty for form-creation. But so quick is their phase of selection that it has the look of spontaneity, often described as ‘inspiration’ by the non-formalists.

Once the cohesion of form and content is wrought, the organic form becomes inviolable. How must we then account for aesthetic overhauling or revision? Revision actually implies that the pre-revised form was not ‘organic’ in nature. Revision in art is an approximation towards a seamless accretion of form and content. Rightly does Pope maintain in *Epistle to Augustus* that ‘The last and greatest art, (is) the art to blot’. But once organicity is forged, the two coalescent entities become literally inseparable. From the aesthetic point of view, therefore, a work of art is untranslatable. Indeed, if thought is not taken in its rational abstraction, one thought can exist only in one form. So we cannot translate any idea into a different language (form) without divorcing form from content. (Wellek 55) Let alone translation, even the arrangement of words can no way be altered. Nor can a single word which apparently strikes superfluous be removed from a form finally created. Prof. F.R. Leavis informs us how Mr Sturge Moore once spoilt the poetry of the opening lines of ‘The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo’, when, in order to improve he sifted and rearranged them. So an aesthetic organism, unlike a biological organism, responds neither to cloning nor to mutation. The organic form is absolutely unimprovable. With respect to content, it is neither primary nor secondary, though the importance of form-creation can hardly be exaggerated. One concludes that the intangible form which is one with content cannot fade in if an artist neglects the tangible form—his material as well as his method.

### Notes

This is how Eliot renders the struggle palpable : ‘Words strain and Crack and sometimes break, under the burden/Under the tension, slip, slide, perish/Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place/Will not stay still.’

Cf. “...the poet does not sing by any art but by the divine power”, Plato, *In Ion. Great Dialogues of Plato*. Trans. W. H. D. Rouse, eds, E. H. Wilmington and P. G. Rouse (New York : The New York American Library, 1956).

Hopkins’s inimitable lines, “How to keep—is there any, is there none such, nowhere known some, bow or brooch or braid or brace, lace, latch or catch or key to keep/Back beauty, keep it beauty, beauty, beauty ... from vanishing away?” were rewritten as



"How to keep beauty is there any way?  
Is there nowhere any means to have it stay  
Will no bow or brooch or braid,  
Brace or lace  
Latch or Catch  
Or key to lock the door lend aid  
Before beauty vanishes away?"

Professor Leavis rightly comments that Moore has not bettered but wrongly "discarded, not merely a certain amount of music, but with the emotional crescendo and diminuendo, the plangent rise and fall, all the action and substance of the verse". See *New Bearings in English Poetry*. (Middlesex : Penguin, 1982), p. 129.

### Works Cited

Arnold, Matthew. *Essays in Criticism*. Second Series. Bareilly, : Student Press, 1964.

Feidelson, Charles. ed. *Oscar Wilde : A Collection of Critical Essays*. 1969. rpt. New Delhi : Prentice Hall, 1980.

Nostrand, Albert D. Van. ed. *Literary Criticism in America*. New York : The Liberal Arts Press, 1957.

Novitz, David, "Art, Life and Reality. *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 30 (October 1990).

Osborne, John. Introduction. *The Picture of Dorian Gray : A Moral Entertainment*, London : Faber and Faber, 1973.

Pater, Walter. "Styled". *Appreciations*. Calcutta : Rupa, 1967.

Peters, Robert. ed. *Victorians on Literature and Art*. London : Peter Owen, 1964.

Read, Herbert. *Form in Modern Poetry*. London : Vision Press 1948.

Sengupta, S.C. *Towards a Theory of Imagination*. Calcutta : Oxford UP, 1959.

Wellek, Rene. *Concepts of Criticism*. New Haven : Yale UP, 1963.

Wilde, Oscar. The Critic as Artist. *Poems and Essays*. Intr. Kingsley Amis. London : Collins, 1956. Cited as PE.

... Rev. of Keats' "Sonnet on Blue". *A Critic on Pall Mall*. London : Methuen, 1919. Cited as Rev. Keats.

... *Selected Letters of Oscar Wilde*. Ed. Rupert Hart-Davis. Oxford : Oxford UP, 1979. Cited SL.

Wimsatt, W. K. and C. Brooks. *Literary Criticism : A Short History*. 1957. Rpt. Calcutta : Oxford & IBH, n.d.

Zis, Avner. *Foundations of Marxist Aesthetics*. Moscow : Progress Publishing, 1977.